

The *Amistad* Research Center

Resting quietly in the stacks of the *Amistad* Research Center in Tilton Memorial Hall on the campus of Tulane University in New Orleans is a cultural resource, the American Missionary Association Archives, which grew out of one of the most explosive episodes in the history of slavery—the *Amistad* incident.

Today, through endowments and with regular contributions from the United Church of Christ, the American Missionary Association (AMA), which is now a division of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, contributes to the support of Dillard, Huston-Tillotson, Tougaloo, Talladega, and LeMoyné-Owen. Talladega remains an exclusively AMA institution, but other denominational bodies cooperate with the Association in sustaining LeMoyné-Owen, Dillard, Huston-Tillotson, and Tougaloo. The AMA also retains an interest in Hampton Institute, Fisk University, and Atlanta University, which it founded and supported during its formative years.

The American Missionary Association Archives, which is the flagship collection of the *Amistad* Research Center, contains approximately 350,000 manuscript pieces and primarily spans the period 1839-1882, but several thousand are dated before and after that period. Letters make up the majority of the papers, and they are of three types.

The largest number, more than 100,000, consists of reports from the foreign and home mission-

aries and teachers. The second largest number is made up of letters from financial and moral supporters of the AMA. The third largest number of letters consists of correspondence among the officers of the Association. Another valuable type of letter (over 1,500) is from government officials. Most of these are from agents of the Freedmen's Bureau, but a large number came from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and a few from prominent men in the executive and legislative branches of government.

The collection also contains some of the Association's treasury papers—account books, annual reports, some minutes, and other items such as sermons, statistical reports, drawings, pictures, and essays.

The papers convey the detailed history of the AMA from its establishment in 1846 to 1882. The materials dating prior to the formation of the AMA relate to several subjects, of which the most important are the *Amistad* case and the futile efforts of the evangelical abolitionists to promote abolitionism among Northern churches and among religious societies.

Aside from the history of the AMA, the papers are most valuable as sources for studying the abolitionist movement, particularly as it affected the Northern Protestant churches, and for studying the education of the freedmen during and after the Civil War. Finally, although not extensive, students of the underground railroad will find

Mutiny Aboard the *Amistad* mural located at the *Amistad* Research Center.



some material of value in the AMA Archives as well. The collection documents the activities of at least 15 home missionaries who were involved with the underground railroad. The collection's finding aid notes that participation was undoubtedly much greater since the AMA was unequivocal in its opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and urged Christians not to obey or aid in its enforcement.

In recent years, the AMA Archives was enhanced by a huge acquisition of additional materials which focus primarily on the educational efforts of the AMA. Among other things, the AMA Addendum documents the founding and early years of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities mentioned above.

The *Amistad* Research Center itself was established by Dr. Clifton H. Johnson in 1966 as a division of the Race Relations Department of Fisk University. In 1969, the Center became an independent archives and moved to Dillard University in New Orleans. Eleven years later, in 1980, it moved to the Old U.S. Mint building (a wonderfully restored and preserved National Historic Landmark), and, finally, in 1987, it relocated to Tilton Memorial Hall on the Tulane University campus.

The Center is an independent, privately supported archives, library, and museum dedicated to preserving the history and culture of African-Americans and ethnic minorities. In fact, about 80 percent of the holdings deal primarily with the history and culture of black Americans, civil rights, and relations between blacks and whites. In addition to its well over 4,000 linear feet of primary source documents, the Center maintains an extensive collection of books, audio and video tapes, and important collections of African and African-American art, such as the Victor DuBois and Aaron Douglas Collections.

Collections generated by women, or about women, account for a larger than usual percentage of holdings at the Center. Most notable in this group are the papers of educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune; journalist, actress, and teacher Marguerite D. Cartwright; Mississippi civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer; author Dorothy Sterling; actress and newspaper columnist Fredi Washington; concert artist Camilia Williams; and artist Dorothy Yepez of New York.

Other noteworthy collections include the Countee Cullen Papers, which contain correspondence and other items of most of the Harlem Renaissance writers; the archives of the Southern Education Reporting Service (later the Race Relations Information Center) which document the

efforts of Southern journalists and newspaper editors to collect and disseminate accurate information relating to the desegregation of public schools in the South; and the records or papers of several important New Orleanians, including those of Ernest N. "Dutch" Morial, first black mayor of the city.

As the Center looks forward to the new century, it is attempting to reach a wider audience by becoming part of the On-Line Computer Library Center (OCLC). All of its holdings will eventually become part of that database. In addition, the Center is refining its new World Wide Web site, which has descriptions of the archives and an on-line collection of paintings from its art collections. In the meantime, the *Amistad* Research Center forges ahead, focusing on its mission of keeping alive for future generations not only the cultural resources related to the *Amistad* incident and the American Missionary Association, but those resources which tell the story of all peoples in the universal struggle for freedom, human rights, dignity, and equality.

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